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CN BC: Ibogaine A One-Way Trip To Sobriety, Pot Head Says

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IBOGAINE A ONE-WAY TRIP TO SOBRIETY, POT HEAD SAYS

Marc Emery may not have made it to the mayor's chair, but the head of the B.C. Marijuana Party has plenty of other ventures to keep him busy. Besides running a seed-distribution business, the peace and pot activist has started a new project that he's especially passionate about, one he says can cure cocaine and heroin addiction at a low price.

He's the man behind the Iboga Therapy House, a place he has rented on the Sunshine Coast that overlooks the ocean and where drug addicts can go for ibogaine treatment.

Ibogaine comes from Tabernanthe iboga, a flowering African shrub that's related to the coffee plant. In some parts of West Africa, it's a hallucinogen used in male rites of passage. Iboga is said to induce wild visualizations, be nonaddictive, and have anti-addictive qualities.

Advocates allege that one or two doses is enough to cure addiction, whether it's to crack cocaine, heroin, alcohol, or nicotine. Unlike methadone, which is itself addictive, ibogaine does not produce painful withdrawal symptoms.

Emery, who started treating addicts from the Downtown Eastside two months ago, covers the costs, which amount to about \$1,500 per person. He takes in up to four addicts per week and has administered oral doses of ibogaine himself to nearly a dozen people. It's the first such program in North America.

"This could be a very effective way of treating people at a very low cost," he

told the Straight on the line from the Sunshine Coast. "People who have been through opiate withdrawal are amazed. They don't have a dripping nose, there's no nausea. This has been a revelatory experience. I'm hoping the government will pick it up."

Though not approved by Health Canada, ibogaine is not a prohibited product under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, Emery noted. The substance is illegal in the United States, but it's available through an international black market, and there are private clinics in the Caribbean and Panama City. "It's an underground phenomenon all over the world," said Emery, who orders ibogaine from Ontario, Slovenia, and Holland.

One of the alleged benefits of ibogaine is that it doesn't cause the horrible flulike side effects that people withdrawing from heroin or cocaine typically endure, such as diarrhea, cramps, anxiety, and muscle twitches. However, some preclinical studies have indicated that the substance could cause lasting damage to the cerebellum, leading to loss of motor coordination.

The use of ibogaine to treat addiction got its first push from Howard Lotsof, an American who patented the therapy. He's credited with recording initial observations of the effects of ibogaine on heroin addicts who took the substance to get high in the mid-1960s. (Lotsof was one of them.)

Lotsof tried to go beyond anecdotal evidence by conducting preclinical research. He approached pharmaceutical companies to back his efforts, but none responded--likely because of the lack of potential profit, since the medicine is usually taken only once. He pushed for the Food and Drug Administration's approval of clinical trials, but that plan fell apart in 1993, when a 24-year-old heroin user died about 20 hours after taking ibogaine. (Two other addicts have also died following ibogaine treatment.) The therapy has its critics, like American drug researcher Peter Hoyle, who, according to a recent High Times article, doesn't think there's enough evidence to warrant human trials--especially since the mechanism of ibogaine's action isn't understood.

Without any official stamp of approval, Lotsof continues research and treatment (mainly in Holland). He recently cowrote a revised Manual for Ibogaine Therapy: Screening, Safety, Monitoring & Aftercare, which cautions that "treatment providers and patients are solely responsible for their actions."

"The extremely costly regulatory approval process and the reluctance by major pharmaceutical firms to pursue regulatory approval in the West has led to the formation of non-medical ibogaine treatment," the manual says. "This document is intended principally for lay-healers who have little or no medical experience, but who are nevertheless concerned with patient safety and the outcome of Ibogaine treatments."

Lotsof urges caregivers to insist that people have a complete physical,

including an electrocardiogram, before treatment. Emery has studied that document as well as others on the Ibogaine Dossier Web site (www.ibogaine.org/), which has opinions and information related to the treatment.

Emery said he--or another of the "facilitators" at the Iboga Therapy House who are trained in first aid--observes people for about 24 hours after the administration of ibogaine and monitors their blood pressure and pulse regularly. Emery added that the hospital is a 10-minute drive away and that all candidates have to sign a medical-release form.

Anyone is welcome, Emery said, as long as they stop taking drugs for 24 hours before treatment. He said he recommends two doses, about a week apart, to prevent a relapse. "Typically the first dose cancels the physical addiction," Emery said, "and the second targets the psychological underpinnings of addiction."

Emery, who's never taken ibogaine himself, said the substance can cause intense visualizations lasting eight to 18 hours. He also said that because of the lack of withdrawal symptoms, ibogaine can help addicts address other issues. "Being an addict can be a great excuse in a financial or emotional crisis," he noted. "This gives them the strength and courage to face their problems without giving in to their weaknesses. They have an opportunity to reinvent themselves, so they need to stay away from triggers or temptation."

The Iboga Therapy House has fitness equipment, instruments, games like crib and chess, and a meditation room--anything that "gives people pleasure that doesn't involve drugs", Emery said--but no TV. Emery, who doesn't accept money from addicts unless they want to donate after they've been clean for at least three months, said he'd like to see the treatment made available to all Vancouver addicts, who can contact him via the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (604-683-8595).

He added that he hasn't encountered any opposition to the ibogaine project yet. "I've never run into critics," he said, "because there's nothing to criticize."

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